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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BASRAH 000131

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SUBJECT: STATE OF PLAY IN MAYSAN PROVINCE

REF: BASRAH 47

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CLASSIFIED BY: Ken Gross, Regional Coordinator, REO Basrah,
Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (b)

¶1. (C) Summary: On August 15, the Regional Coordinator (RC) and poloff met with Abu Muslim al-Saadi, a close REO contact from Maysan province. Abu Muslim expressed his concern with democracy building in Iraq and suggested that coalition forces work closely with and support moderate religious clerics to assist in these efforts. He was apprehensive about a campaign by the Shahid al-Mehrab organization to promote its idea of federalism --the idea of the nine southern Shia provinces forming one super region. Abu Muslim and other moderates in Maysan are attempting educate people on the basic ideas of federalism in an effort to counter the campaign. Abu Muslim also said that Maysan would be ready for transition to Iraqi security control only when tensions between the Sadr dominated local government and Badr controlled security forces were eased and Iraqis were able to control the 275-kilometer border with Iran. End summary.

¶2. (C) On August 15, the RC and poloff met with Hussein Jaloob al-Saadi, known as Abu Muslim, a former member of the Interim Iraqi National Council from Maysan province and a close REO contact. Abu Muslim currently heads an NGO in Maysan province, Al-Huda Foundation for Strategic Studies, and works closely with coalition forces to promote democracy through dialogue and by educating the people of Maysan about democracy. (See reftel for more information on Abu Muslim.)

BUILDING DEMOCRACY

¶3. (C) Abu Muslim described the current situation in Maysan as the "status quo." He said that there were numerous political assassinations and counted 10 since the beginning of August; discord between the local government and security forces continues, as do attacks on coalition forces based in the province. Abu Muslim's greatest concern is about democracy building in Iraq. He opined that the best ways to deal with obstacles hindering democracy is to eliminate the militias within the security forces, assist political parties who truly believe in and understand democracy and support moderate religious clerics to counter the Islamic extremists now so prevalent.

¶4. (C) The RC asked Abu Muslim if he could provide the names of some of the moderate clerics in Maysan that he believes should receive more support. Abu Muslim named the following persons:

-- Dr. Abdul Jabar al-Rifa'e is the owner of the "Islamic Sector" newspaper and has written books on religion and

anti-extremism. He is currently an advisor to the Minister of Education.

-- Mohammed Abdul Jabbar Shabut also owns a newspaper, the "Islamic Democratic".

-- Dhiya' al-Chikarch is another moderate cleric who has written books on Islam and democracy.

Abu Muslim's NGO holds weekly meetings to discuss ways to promote democracy and find other moderate voices that he can work with.

CONCERNS ABOUT FEDERALISM IN THE SOUTH

15. (C) Abu Muslim also expressed worries about the Shahid al-Mehrab organization, a SCIRI linked entity with substantial funding from Iran, and its leader, Amar al-Hakim, whose efforts to promote the "federalism" idea of the nine southern Shi'a provinces of Iraq joining to become one region. He said that al-Hakim was recently in Al-Amarah to promote this concept and met with various tribal, political and religious leaders. According to Abu Muslim, if the nine provinces become one region, it will be "the most dangerous thing to happen to Iraq" in terms of democracy and stability. He, along with other moderate leaders in Maysan, wrote a pamphlet outlining the basic ideas of federalism to educate the people of Maysan. The authors of the pamphlet hope that increasing understanding of federalism will help deter people from buying in to the ideas being touted by the Shahid al-Mehrab organization and others.

MAYSAN READY FOR PIC?

16. (C) When asked about Maysan's readiness for transition to provincial Iraqi control of security, Abu Muslim said that two problems must first be resolved. He compared Muthanna, which has already transitioned, to Maysan and said that one of the differences is that in Muthanna the chief of police, governor and Iraqi army commander are all from the same party and work

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well together. In Maysan, however, the tension and fighting between the Sadr local government and the Badr security forces is well known. He said that tensions must be eased and the numerous assassinations must decrease. The second difference between Muthanna and Maysan is the latter's 275-kilometer border with Iran. Abu Muslim said that the border with Iran must be better controlled to prevent the flood of weapons that come across from Iran. He does not believe that the Iraqi security forces currently have the ability or the desire to secure the border. Until these two issues are resolved, he does not believe the province is ready for transition to Iraqi control.

COMMENT

17. (C) Comment: Abu Muslim is a long-time close REO contact, always willing and eager to meet with us. His recent work behind the scenes was instrumental getting the local government to re-engage with coalition forces after an incident between British forces and local militias. He works at the grass roots level to promote democracy and its importance to the future of Iraq through his organization and wields his influence with political, tribal and religious leaders to counter threats to democracy. Before he left, REO Basrah provided him with several books Public Diplomacy supplied Arabic language books on democracy and other subjects for him to distribute, and he dispenses them widely. Educated (he spent several years studying Islam in Qom) and moderate voices like his are what is needed to counter the growing threat of extremism in the south. End comment.

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